

## STONE HOUSE IN THE PLAZA

**T**he house ... is somewhat low, its lines not quite correct: whether the architect who built it had poor eyesight or this was due to the effects of earthquakes and typhoons, no one can say with certainty. A wide stairway with green balusters and carpeted steps leads from the tile-paved zaguan, or entrance, up the main floor between rows of flower-pots set upon pedestals of vari-colored and fantastically decorated Chinese porcelain ... . Should we proceed up the stairs, we find ourselves at once in a spacious hallway called for reasons which escape me the *caida*, which tonight serves as the dining room and at the same time a place for the orchestra. In the center, a long table profusely and sumptuously decorated seems to entice freeloaders with sweet promises ... .

Contrasting with these mundane preparations are the motley paintings on the walls representing religious subjects such as ... "The Death of the Just," "Of the Sinner," while at the end of the room, imprisoned in a splendid and elegant Renaissance-style frame, most likely carved by Arevalo, is a curious canvas of large dimensions in which are depicted two old women ... its inscription reads: "Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage, who is venerated in Antipolo, visits in the disguise of a beggar the pious and renowned Capitana Inez during her illness." It may well be that the work reveals neither good taste

nor art, but it possesses in compensation an extreme realism, ... the glasses and other objects, trappings of long illness, are so minutely reproduced that even their contents can be distinguished ...

In contemplating these pictures ... one may be led to think that the perverse host knew full well the characters of the majority of those who are to sit at his table and, to veil his thoughts somewhat, he has hung from the ceiling precious Chinese lanterns; birdcages without birds; red, green, and blue glass globes of frosted glass; withered air-plants [ferns]; and dried and inflated [puffer] fish, which they call botetes. The side facing the river is enclosed by whimsical wooden arches, half-Chinese and half-European, affording glimpses of an azotea with arbors and gloriets [gazebos] dimly lighted by paper lanterns of all colors.

There in the sala, amidst colossal mirrors and gleaming chandeliers, the guests are assembled. There in a raised platform stands the magnificent grand piano of exorbitant price, made even more precious tonight because no one plays it. There on a wall hangs a large painting in oil of a handsome man in dress coat, stiff, erect, straight as the baston de borlas he holds in his rigid, ring-covered fingers: the portrait seems to say, "Hmph! See how well dressed and how dignified I am!" (Noli Me Tangere, 1961f, p. 2)

It is always rewarding and enjoyable to read Jose Rizal's novels for incomparable glimpses of the life and times of late 19th-century Philippines. Rizal had a keen eye for detail and a marvelous sense of the absurd. And he based many of his characters on actual living persons of his time. The descriptive passage quoted above from *Noli Me Tangere* tells us more about 19th-century ilustrado life than all the books one hopes to read up on this period. This particular house that Rizal describes as Capitan Tiago's was in the real world situated at 23 Calle Anloague in Binondo; his inspiration for his fictional house being the actual home of Balbino Mauricio. A companion of Rizal, Jose Alejandrino (1986, p. 224), in a talk before the *Asociacion de Hispanistas* in 1941 affirms this: "According to him (Rizal), it belonged to a certain gentleman called Balbino Mauricio. This house must be the one that now bears number 175 on Juan Luna Street." [Under the American regime, Manila's Anloague and Jolo streets were joined and renamed Juan Luna.]

Balbino Mauricio was a wealthy Binondo businessman-lawyer, originally from Cavite, who was implicated in the Cavite Mutiny of 1872 along with some other prominent criollos. Deported to Guam, he and co-accused Antonio Maria Regidor escaped in the guise of priests hidden in the belly of the American schooner *Rupax* to the island of Yap. An English vessel took them to the Solomon Islands and thence to a deserted island in the Palaus, where after two months a German schooner rescued them and transported them to Hong Kong. Regidor managed to get to London where he hobnobbed with leaders of the Philippine Propaganda Movement in Europe of the 1880s. Mauricio rebuilt his life in Hong Kong where he remained in dire financial straits until his death.

His house on Anloague, however, remains forever preserved in the very first pages of Rizal's novel as an icon of the flamboyant lifestyle of the nouveau riche Chinese mestizo. Vignettes of the interiors of this very same mansion have also been immortalized in a painting dated 1864 by Jose Lozano in his unique *letras y figuras* style, the canvas spelling out vividly the owner's name: "Balvino [with a 'v'] Mauricio"; each letter a clever configuration of interior scenes of the Mauricio mansion.

The principalia mestizos took this large roomy colonial-period house to its highest point in the 19th century. The first Filipino architect, Felix Roxas, began to practice his profession around 1866 working for the Manila government. His son, Felix Roxas Jr., would write personal recollections of late 19th-century life. Roxas, the elder, built several grandiose ilustrado homes one of which may still be standing, if somewhat shakily, on R. Hildalgo street in the district of Quiapo.

Once described by a scholar-painter as "... like a gigantic birdcage" (Zobel de Ayala, 1963, p. 28) because it was well-ventilated, these days this ilustrado architectural style is referred to by another later-day scholar as *bahay na bato* (*casa de piedra*) or stone house. As an architectural form, it evolved from the Indio nipa hut's spatial arrangement and basic structure, borrowing its high peaked roof and the above-ground first floor concepts. Fused into this Indio hut were Hispanic architectural features in durable materials of stone and brick. Nineteenth-century documents describe such edifices as *de cal y canto* (of stone and mortar). Chinese artisanship added its



own character to the structure. The prototype for this hybrid house was very likely the *convento*, the residence of the parish priest built beside the church which features tile roofs, wide narra timber floors, and sliding windows paned with capiz shells. Over the centuries, the archipelago's typhoons and earthquakes continually cut (figuratively speaking) these early hispanicized structures down to size, physically vetoing structurally unacceptable hispanic borrowings until, by the end of the 19th century, experience had shaped the *bahay na bato* to fully adapt to the tropical environment and to better withstand earthquakes.

The ilustrado house became the characteristic feature of many a prosperous town plaza. While the galleon-trade economy had generally confined wealth to Manila in earlier times, in the 19th century, thanks to the agricultural boom, the money spread out to many regions and the *cal y canto* mansion mushroomed in just about every town, giving the plaza its distinct 19th-century Filipino look. In pre-Hispanic days, the Indio lived in scattered groupings along river banks, making it difficult for the early Spanish missionaries to baptize and hold on to their newly evangelized flock. To attract and keep Indio converts sedentary, the missionaries pushed for urbanization as a social lifestyle that would keep their converts captive within calling distance to church – or, as the missionaries put it, *bajo las campanas* (under the bells, that is within hearing distance of the church bells). The bigger the town, the bigger the bells. The town plaza took shape: first there was the church and across it a government building or tribunal; then on both sides, boxing in the public square or plaza, were erected the mansions of the principalia, sometimes with a schoolhouse on one side. The plaza followed a fixed formula in accordance with the ancient Roman model: measuring one and a half times its width, the area to be no smaller than 60 by 90 meters. The main streets ran straight along the perimeter of the plaza. Every major town had its plaza by the late 19th century in which most certainly the *bahay na bato* was conspicuous. These were the homes of the town elite, the principalia class. Urban living was a Hispanic contribution made patent by the town plaza complex; and urban life began to really prosper under the wealthy principalia class.

The people who have left such vivid imprints in the 19th century were mostly the mestizos. They made up the majority of the painters and the writers, and as well the characters in the novels, the sitters in the surviving portraits of the epoch. In articulating their hopes and frustrations, their dreams and their anguish, they have allowed us to reach beyond time and memory to a different lifestyle, to the sound of brass bands playing in the streets, to the gregarious noise and bustle of a highly social community driven by fiestas, *tertulias*, evening serenades and promenades, cockfights and *panguingue* card-playing, religious processions, and much public ostentation.

## HOW TO WRITE A BESTSELLER

In that belle époque, a book written in Tagalog entitled *Urbana at Feliza* was the century's bestseller. Its author was a Filipino priest named Don Modesto de Castro. His work did not discuss politics; neither were its contents literary. Rather, it was one of those books whose time had come: a response to a growing need among the aspiring ilustrado class for a guide to urbane manners; a treatise which would recast Christian morals in terms of traditional Tagalog Indio values; a guide to European etiquette for the urbanized principalia. Some portions of the book covered matters of social graces as trivial as how to write a letter, how to blow one's nose in a handkerchief, how to pick up a drinking glass, and so on.

But more often than not, de Castro's counsel grappled with life's eternal Christian problems from how to choose one's marital partner to how to come to terms with death. The faithful, so de Castro believed, lived in a jungle of temptation and evil; the situation called for eternal vigilance and combat. "Man's life on earth," he wrote, "is always one of combat, therefore, prepare the sword, do not be tempted, use all your might, strengthen your will to fight and you will be steadfast when the battle comes" (1902, p. 53).

Written in the form of letters between two Tagalog sisters named Urbana and Feliza, the book which was published in the 1860s was both

a spiritual reading and a discussion of manners and morals addressed to young parents: "You who have just entered the threshold of this wide world" (1902, p. 3).

Fr. de Castro was clearly addressing the members of the ilustrado-principalia class; it was they who had acquired Hispanic trappings, who could read, and who could afford the price of a book. The author was himself a member of the principalia, flagging the title of don. He spoke of the moral responsibility (in noblesse oblige fashion) of principalia leaders to their town or community. The youth, he counseled, should prepare themselves to enter public office, presumably that of cabeza de barangay and subsequently of gobernadorcillo. Here, de Castro used the term *catungculan sa bayan*, meaning duty or obligation to the community or town. In Tagalog, the term *bayan* refers to a town or municipality, but it later evolved to also mean the country or nation. Thus, de Castro, while obviously limiting his reference only to the principalia level of a town, might have planted the seeds of the moral leadership and responsibilities of the principalia to the nation. One obvious trait of the ilustrado propagandists of the last quarter of the 19th century was their self-appointed messianic role as social and moral educators of their countrymen.

As the rising new mestizo class grew more urbanized and Hispanicized, they looked for guidance on proper behavior in a Europeanized society. The opening of the Suez Canal which made the West more accessible to the archipelago, the variety of European goods (by-products of Western culture) disgorged by world trade, plus the exciting presence of a growing European community in Manila offered desirable models of progress for the ilustrado.

As well-traveled students and professionals, the ilustrados among the principalia had a good look at the outside world. The steamboat had shortened the voyage to Spain and Europe to a month with exotic stopovers along the way, exposing the ilustrado to diverse ancient civilizations and progressive cities. The new moneyed class spent their lucre on the status symbols of the West: books, porcelain plates, silverware, chandeliers, harps, pianos, wallpaper, and top hats.

*Urbana at Feliza* keyed them to the proper lifestyle. All these newfangled Western styles of living were cleverly placed by Fr. de Castro



in the context of traditional Tagalog mores with pointed references to familiar social values such as *hiya* (shame), *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), and *paquikipagcapoua tauo* (identifying and getting along with others). In de Castro's words: "If someone does him a good turn, then thank him, acknowledge the debt, and repay this in good time, because it is a failing, a loss of virtue, not to acknowledge *utang na loob*" (1902, p. 24).

The new wealthy class needed to feel at home in an urbanized and Hispanicized Tagalog society, and here de Castro's book served as a manual which lucidly preserved basic Tagalog values and culture while adapting Catholic and citified European manners. De Castro was talking exclusively to Tagalog readers, of course, but the book proved so popular it was later translated into Visayan, Bicolano, and Ilocano. It seems *Urbana at Feliza* had mined a common traditional bank of social mores shared by other regional groups in the archipelago; how else could one explain its appeal to an emerging self-consciously "Filipino" society? *Urbana at Feliza* remains an interesting document that expressed, very likely for the first time in print, Filipino manners and mores at a point in time when an identifiably Christian Filipino society was coming into its own. In idealized form, Fr. de Castro portrayed the Tagalog upper class as religious, ethical, and socially conscious. Only after more than two decades into the 20th century when the United States as colonizer had aggressively imposed a different set of morals and manners for the youth via the public school system (in a course called Good Manners and Right Conduct) would this 19th-century bestseller lose its appeal.